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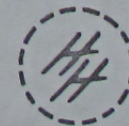
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BROWNING  
AND  
THE DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE

NATURE AND INTERPRETATION OF AN  
OVERLOOKED FORM OF LITERATURE

S. S. CURRY, PH.D., LITT.D.  
PRESIDENT OF THE SCHOOL OF EXPRESSION



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## PART I

### THE MONOLOGUE AS A DRAMATIC FORM

#### I. A NEW LITERARY FORM

WHY were the poems of Robert Browning so long unread? Why was his real message or spirit understood by few forty years after he began to write?

The story is told that Douglas Jerrold, when recovering from a serious illness, opened a copy of "Sordello," which was among some new books sent to him by a friend. Sentence after sentence brought no consecutive thought, and at last it dawned upon him that perhaps his sickness had wrecked his mental faculties, and he sank back on the sofa, overwhelmed with dismay. Just then his wife and sister entered and, thrusting the book into their hands, he eagerly demanded what they thought of it. He watched them intently, and when at last Mrs. Jerrold exclaimed, "I do not understand what this man means," Jerrold uttered a cry of relief, "Thank God, I am not an idiot!" Browning, while protesting that he was not obscure, used to tell this story with great enjoyment.

What was the chief cause of the almost universal failure to understand Browning? Many reasons are assigned. His themes were such as had never before been found in poetry, his allusions and illustrations so unfamiliar as to presuppose wide knowledge on the part of the reader; he had a very concise and abrupt way of stating things.



Yet, after all, were these the chief causes? Was he not obscure because he had chosen a new or unusual dramatic form? Nearly every one of his poems is written in the form of a monologue, which, according to Professor Johnson, "may be termed a novelty of invention in Browning." Hence, to the average man of a generation ago, Browning's poems were written in almost a new language.

This secret of the difficulty of appreciating Browning is not even yet fully realized. There are many "Introductions" to his poems and some valuable works on his life, yet nowhere can we find an adequate discussion of his dramatic form, its nature, and the influence it has exerted upon modern poetry.

Let us endeavor to take the point of view of the average man who opened one of Browning's volumes when first published; or let us imagine the feeling of an ordinary reader to-day on first chancing upon such a poem as "The Patriot."

The average man beginning to read, "It was roses, roses," fancies he is reading a mere story and waits for the unfolding of events, but very soon becomes confused. Where is he? Nothing happens. Somebody is talking, but about what?

One who looks for mere effects and not for causes, for facts and not for experiences, for a mere sequence of events, and not for the laying bare of the motives and struggles of the human heart, will be apt soon to throw the book down and turn to his daily paper to read the accounts of stocks, fires, or murders, disgusted with the very name of Browning, if not with poetry.

If he look more closely, he will find a subtitle, "An Old Story," but this confuses him still more.

"Story" is evidently used in some peculiar sense, and "old" may be used in the sense of ancient, familiar, or oft-repeated; it may imply that certain results always follow certain conditions. If a care-

## THE PATRIOT

## AN OLD STORY

It was roses, roses, all the way,  
With myrtle mixed in my path like mad:  
The house-roofs seemed to heave and sway,  
The church-spires flamed, such flags they had,  
A year ago on this very day.

The air broke into a mist with bells,  
The old walls rocked with the crowd and cries.  
Had I said, "Good folk, mere noise repels —  
But give me your sun from yonder skies!"  
They had answered "And afterward, what else?"

Alack, it was I who leaped at the sun  
To give it my loving friends to keep!  
Naught man could do, have I left undone:  
And you see my harvest, what I reap  
This very day, now a year is run.

There's nobody on the house-tops now —  
Just a palsied few at the windows set;  
For the best of the sight is, all allow,  
At the Shambles' Gate — or, better yet,  
By the very scaffold's foot, I trow.

I go in the rain, and, more than needs,  
A rope cuts both my wrists behind;  
And I think, by the feel, my forehead bleeds,  
For they fling, whoever has a mind,  
Stones at me for my year's misdeeds.

Thus I entered, and thus I go!  
In triumphs, people have dropped down dead.  
"Paid by the world, what dost thou owe  
Me?" — God might question; now instead,  
'Tis God shall repay: I am safer so,



ful student glance through the poem, he will find that the Patriot is one who entered the city a year before, and who during this time has done his best to secure reforms, but at the end of the year is led forth to the scaffold. The poem pictures to us the thoughts that stir his mind on the way to his death. He recognizes the same street, he remembers the roses, the myrtle, the house-roofs so crowded that they seem to heave and sway, the flags on the church spires, the bells, the willingness of the multitude to give him even the sun; but he it is who aimed at the impossible — to give his friends the sun. Having done all he could, now comes his reward. There is nobody on the house-tops, and only a few too old to go to the scaffold have crept to the windows. The great crowd is at the gate or at the scaffold's foot. He goes in the rain, his hands tied behind him, his forehead bleeding from the stones that are hurled at him. The closing thought, so abruptly expressed, the most difficult one in the poem, is a mere hint of what might have happened had he triumphed in the world's sense of the word. He might have fallen dead, — dead in a deeper sense than the loss of life; his soul might have become dead to truth, to noble ideals, and to aspiration. Had he done what men wanted him to do, he would have been paid by the world. He has certainly not done the world's bidding, and in a few short words he reveals his resignation, his heroism, and his sublime triumph.

"Now instead,  
'T is God shall repay: I am safer so."

The first line of the last stanza in the first edition of the poem contained the word "Brescia," sug-

gesting a reference to the reformer Arnold. But Browning later omitted "Brescia," because the poem was not meant to be in any sense historical, but rather to represent the reformer of every age whose ideals are misunderstood and whose noblest work is rewarded by death. "History," said Aristotle, "tells what Alcibiades did, poetry what he ought to have done." "The Patriot" is not a matter-of-fact narrative, but a revelation of human experience.

The reader must approach such a poem as a work of art. Sympathetic and contemplative attention must be given to it as an entirety. Then point after point, idea after idea, will become clear and vivid, and at last the whole will be intensely realized.

For another example of Browning's short poems take "A Woman's Last Word."

Suppose one tries to read this as if it were an ordinary lyric. One is sure to be greatly confused as to its meaning. What is it all about? The words are simple enough, and while the ordinary man recognizes this, he is all the more perplexed. Perceiving certain merits, he exclaims, "If a man can write such beautiful individual lines, why does he not make his whole story clear and simple?"

If, however, one will meditate over the whole, take hints here and there and put them together, a distinct picture is slowly formed in the mind. A wife, whose husband demands that she explain to him something in her past life, is speaking. She has perhaps loved some one before him, and his curiosity or jealousy is aroused. The poem really constitutes her appeal to his higher nature and her insistence upon the sacredness of their present re-



lation, which she fears words may profane. She does not even fully understand the past herself. To explain would be false to him, hence with love and tenderness she pleads for delay. Yet she promises to speak his "speech," but "to-morrow, not to-night." Perhaps she hopes that his mood will change; possibly she feels that he is not now in the right attitude of mind to understand or sympathize with her experiences.

## A WOMAN'S LAST WORD

LET's contend no more, Love, Strive nor weep:	Be a god and hold me With a charm!
All be as before, Love, — Only sleep!	Be a man and fold me With thine arm!
What so wild as words are? I and thou	Teach me, only teach, Love! As I ought
In debate, as birds are, Hawk on bough!	I will speak thy speech, Love, Think thy thought —
See the creature stalking While we speak!	Meet, if thou require it, Both demands
Hush and hide the talking, Cheek on cheek.	Laying flesh and spirit In thy hands.
What so false as truth is, False to thee?	That, shall be to-morrow, Not to-night:
Where the serpent's tooth is, Shun the tree —	I must bury sorrow Out of sight:
Where the apple reddens, Never pry —	— Must a little weep, Love, (Foolish me!)
Lest we lose our Edens, Eve and I.	And so fall asleep, Love, Loved by thee.

In this poem a most delicate relation between two human beings is interpreted. Short though it is, it yet goes deeper into motives, concentrates attention more energetically upon one point of view,

and is possibly more impressive than if the theme had been unfolded in a play or novel. It turns the listener or reader within himself, and he feels in his own breast the response to her words.

All great art discharges its function by evoking imagination and feeling, but it is not always the intellectual meaning which first appears.

However far apart these two poems may be in spirit or subject, there are certain characteristics common to them; they are both monologues.

The monologue, as Browning has exemplified it, is one end of a conversation. A definite speaker is conceived in a definite, dramatic situation. Usually we find also a well-defined listener, though his character is understood entirely from the impression he produces upon the speaker. We feel that this listener has said something and that his presence and character influence the speaker's thought, words, and manner. The conversation does not consist of abstract remarks, but takes place in a definite situation as a part of human life.

We must realize the situation, the speaker, the hearer, before the meaning can become clear; and it is the failure to do this which has caused many to find Browning obscure.

For example, observe Browning's "Confessions."

## CONFESSIONS

WHAT is he buzzing in my ears?  
"Now that I come to die,  
Do I view the world as a vale of tears?"  
Ah, reverend sir, not I!

What I viewed there once, what I view again  
Where the physic bottles stand  
On the table's edge, — is a suburb lane,  
With a wall to my bedside hand.



That lane sloped, much as the bottles do,  
 From a house you could descry  
 O'er the garden-wall: is the curtain blue  
 Or green to a healthy eye?

To mine, it serves for the old June weather  
 Blue above lane and wall;  
 And that farthest bottle labelled "Ether"  
 Is the house o'er-topping all.

At a terrace, somewhere near the stopper,  
 There watched for me, one June,  
 A girl: I know, sir, it's improper,  
 My poor mind's out of tune.

Only, there was a way . . . you crept  
 Close by the side, to dodge  
 Eyes in the house, two eyes except:  
 They styled their house "The Lodge."

What right had a lounge up their lane?  
 But, by creeping very close,  
 With the good wall's help, — their eyes might strain  
 And stretch themselves to Oes,

Yet never catch her and me together,  
 As she left the attic, there,  
 By the rim of the bottle labelled "Ether,"  
 And stole from stair to stair,

And stood by the rose-wreathed gate. Alas,  
 We loved, sir — used to meet:  
 How sad and bad and mad it was —  
 But then, how it was sweet!

Here, evidently, the speaker, who has "come to die," has been aroused by some "reverend sir," who has been expostulating with him and uttering conventional phrases about the vanity of human life. Such superficial pessimism awakens protest, and the dying man remonstrates in the words of the poem.

The speaker is apparently in bed and hardly believes himself fully possessed of his senses. He even asks if the curtain is "green or blue to a healthy eye," as if he feared to trust his judgment, lest it be perverted by disease.

An abrupt beginning is very characteristic of a monologue, and when given properly, the first words arrest attention and suggest the situation.

After the speaker's bewildered repetition of the visitor's words and his blunt-answer "not I," which says such views are not his own, he talks of his "bedside hand," turns a row of bottles into a street, and tells of the sweetest experience of his life. He refuses to say that it was not sweet; he will not allow an abnormal condition such as his sickness to determine his views of life. The result is an introspection of the deeper hope found in the heart of man.

The poem is not an essay or a sermon, it is not the lyric expression of a mood; it portrays the conflict of individual with individual and reveals the deepest motives of a character. It is not a dialogue, but only one end of a conversation, and for this reason it more intensely and definitely focuses attention. We see deeper into the speaker's spirit and view of life, while we recognize the superficiality of the creed of his visitor. The monologue thus is dramatic. It interprets human experience and character.

No one who intelligently reads Browning can fail to realize that he was a dramatic poet; in fact he was the first, if not the only, English dramatic poet of the nineteenth century. With his deep insight into the life of his age, as well as his grasp of character, he was the one master whose writing



was needed for the drama of that century; yet he early came into conflict with the modern stage and ceased to write plays before he had mastered the play as a work of art.

He was, however, by nature so dramatic in his point of view that he could never be anything else than a dramatic poet. Hence, he was led to invent, or adopt, a dramatic form different from the play. From the midst of the conflict between poet and stage, between writer and stage artist, the monologue was evolved, or at least recognized and completed as an objective dramatic form.

Any study of the monologue must thus centre attention upon Browning. As Shakespeare reigns the supreme master of the play, so Browning has no peer in the monologue. Others have followed him in its use, but his monologues remain the most numerous, varied, and expressive.

The development of the monologue, in some sense, is connected with the struggles of the modern stage to express the conditions of modern life. A great change has taken place in human experience. In modern civilization the conflicts and complex struggles of human character are usually hidden. Men and women now conceal their emotions. Self-control and repression form a part of the civilized ideal. Men no longer shed tears in public as did Homer's heroes. In our day, a man who is injured does not avenge himself, or if he does he rarely retains the sympathy of his fellow-men. On the contrary, the person wronged now turns over his wronger to the law; conflicts of man with man are fought out in the courts, and a well-ordered government inflicts punishment and rights wrongs.

[All modern life and experience have become more

subjective; hence, it is natural that dramatic art should change its form. Let no one suppose, however, that this change marks the death of dramatic representation. Dramatic art in some shape is necessary as a means of expression in every age. It has become more subtle and suggestive, but it is none the less dramatic.

An important phase of the changes in the character of dramatic art is the recognition of the monologue. The adoption of this form shows the tendency of dramatic art to adapt itself to modern times.

The dramatic monologue, however, did not arise in opposition to the play, but as a new and parallel aspect of dramatic art. It has not the same theme as the play, does not deal with the expression of human life in movement or the complex struggles of human beings with each other, but it reveals the struggle in the depths of the soul. It exhibits the dramatic attitude of mind or the point of view. It is more subjective, more intense, and also more suggestive than the play. It reveals motives and character by a flash to an awakened imagination.

However this new dramatic form may be explained, whatever may be its character, there is hardly a book of poetry that has appeared in recent years that does not contain examples. Many popular writers, it may be unconsciously, employ this form almost to the exclusion of all others. The name itself occurs rarely in English books; but the name is nothing, — the monologue is there.

The presence of the form of the monologue before its full recognition is a proof that it is natural and important. Forms of art are not invented; they are rather discovered. They are direct languages;



each expresses something no other can say. If the monologue is a distinct literary form, then it possesses certain possibilities in expressing the human spirit which are peculiar to itself. It must say something that nothing else can say so well. Its use by Browning, and the greater and greater frequency of its adoption among recent writers, seems to prove the necessity of a careful study of its peculiarities, possibilities, and rendition.

## II. THE SPEAKER

WHAT is there peculiar about the monologue? Can its nature or structure be so explained that a seemingly difficult poem, such as a monologue by Browning, may be made clear and forcible?

In the first place, one should note that the monologue gets its unity from the character of the speaker. It is not merely an impersonal thought, but the expression of one individual to another. It was Hegel, I think, who said that all art implies the expression of a truth, of a thought or feeling, to a person.

In nature we find everywhere a spontaneous unfolding, as in the blooming of a flower. There is no direct presentation of a truth to the apprehension of some particular mind; no modification of it by the character, the prejudice, or the feeling of the speaker. The lily unfolds its loveliness, but does not adapt the time or the direction of its blooming to dominate the attention of some indifferent observer, or express its message so definitely and pointedly as to be more easily understood.

Man, however, rarely, if ever, expresses a truth without a personal coloring due to his own character and the character of the listener. The same truth uttered by different persons appears different. Occasionally a little child, or a man with a childlike nature, may think in a blind, natural way without adapting truth to other minds; but such direct, spontaneous, and truthful expression is extremely rare. It is one of the most important functions of art to teach us the fact that there is always "an intervention of personality," which needs to be realized in its specific interpretation.

The monologue is a study of the effect of mind upon mind, of the adaptation of the ideas of one individual to another, and of the revelation this makes of the characters of speaker and listener.

The nature of the monologue will be best understood by comparing it with some of the literary forms which it resembles, or with which it is often unconsciously confused.

On account of the fact that there is but one speaker, it has been confused with oratory. A monologue is often conceived as a kind of stilted conversational oration; and the word monologue is apt to call to mind some talker, like Coleridge, who monopolized the whole conversation.

A monologue, however, is not a speech. An oration is the presentation of truth to an audience by a personality. There is some purpose at stake; the speaker must strengthen convictions and cause decisions on some point at issue. But a monologue is not an address to an audience; it is a study of character, of the processes of thinking in one individual as moulded by the presence of some other personality. Its theme is not merely the





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